

Since my departure from the FLDS, I have learned that there are laws, both federal and state, that not only govern each child's right to an education but require every child to attend school. I know now that federal and state governments provide money for this to happen. When the FLDS children were taken out of school, no one from the government followed up to see what had been done with the funds that were supposed to educate them, or to bothered to verify that they were being educated.

When I first arrived in Salt Lake City, I received public assistance money that was conditioned on my children's regular attendance at school. In the FLDS, many mothers receive public assistance for their children, but to the best of my knowledge the children are not required to go to school to receive it. Also, based on my knowledge and experience, public assistance received for dependent children is often turned over to the head of the family. FLDS families are required to contribute substantial amounts of money, monthly, to the church leadership. .

### **Taking young girls across state and international borders for “marriages”**

At 18, I was forced to marry Merrill Jessop and become his fourth wife. At that time, in 1986, the normal age for marriage in the community was 18. Under the prophet, Rulon Jeffs, Warren’s father, the norm became 22. After Rulon’s incapacitating stroke, Warren Jeffs began taking power and controlling marriages. He dropped the norm back to 18 but within two years, it was down to 16. This was a problem for the community, as most mothers had been married at 18 or older and felt it was not healthy, emotionally, to get married and become mothers at such a young age.

Somewhere towards the end of 2001, Warren Jeffs started taking young girls from Colorado City, Arizona, and Hildale, Utah, who were between the ages of 14 and 16, to a hotel Merrill Jessop owned in Nevada and performing secret marriages. While not all men in the FLDS have plural marriages and engage in sex with underage girls, it’s

considered socially acceptable and religiously desirable behavior, especially during the leadership of Warren Jeffs.

In 2003, one of the reasons I escaped with my eight children was that Betty, my eldest daughter, was about to turn 14, the age at which young girls were being married. After I fled, Merrill subsequently married two sixteen-year-old girls: One was sent to him from an FLDS group in Canada and the other was sent from Hilldale, Utah, to his home in Colorado City, Arizona, to be his wife. I know this because Merrill introduced both of these teenage girls to my children as his new wives.

### **Special Program for FLDS Women who Want to Leave**

I speak truthfully and from firsthand experience when I say that I was not free to leave my husband or this religion. I needed legal protection from the time I took my first steps away from Merrill Jessop.

I did receive help from Mark Shurtleff, the Attorney General of Utah, shortly after I escaped because Dan Fischer, a successful Utah businessman and former FLDS member, helped me get in touch with his office. Mark Shurtleff understood the gravity of my situation and knew that Merrill Jessop, as one of the most powerful men in the FLDS, would stop at nothing to discredit me. One lawyer who refused to take my case put it this way: "They'll spend a million dollars trying to prove you're crazy."

However, this protection was short-lived once my custody case hit the court system. The case was treated as a normal child custody case rather than as one with extenuating circumstances. I was given an order of protection against Merrill because of his threatening behavior toward me, but he was allowed full access to my children. On

several occasions when he had my children for weekend visits he would make them fast and pray “that God would take a heavy hand with me”. He brought them into the quarrel, which legally he was not supposed to do.

It took two and a half years before I received any housing assistance. Because of the number of my children, I did not qualify for “low income housing”. The only housing I qualified for was Section 8 housing. Furthermore, I had to stand in line behind those who did qualify for “low income housing” but who were applying for Section 8 in order to upgrade their situation.

My eight children, including my handicapped son, Harrison, and I spent a month in a homeless shelter. I was told by a State Worker that I qualified, as far as need, for refuge services. However, those services are only available for people coming from other countries. In other words, there is more help for a woman fleeing persecution from a Communist country than there is for a woman fleeing from polygamy.

Woman leaving closed polygamous communities need physical protection, psychological intervention and emotional support for themselves and their many children. They need housing assistance; most of what exists is for women with 3-4 children, at most.

When I first fled, I felt like I had landed on another planet. I had only limited exposure to the outside world, a world I’d been brainwashed from birth to believe is evil.

My rights to my own life and liberty were taken from me when I was forced to marry Merrill Jessop. I had never known what it meant to be safe until my third day of freedom when we went into hiding. It took me a year before I could think of myself as a person and not an object.

Polygamy is spreading throughout the western United States at a rapid rate. I do not oppose religious freedom. But I do oppose religions that systematically deprive women and children of their Constitutional rights. I stand here today to ask the U.S. government to provide Federal oversight into these closed communities, so that members, such as myself, seeking refuge know where they can find a safe haven should they choose to leave. That the laws of the land are reliably and equably enforced within these communities. That the right to a reasonable education be provided for these children. I ask: At what point does the individual's right to protection and the "pursuit of happiness" supersede the right to practice a religion?